DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 259 968 SO 016 659

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TITLE Use of the Semantic Differential in Teaching about Minority Group Families.
PUB DATE [85]
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Change; Attitude Measures; *Bias; *Cultural Differences; Educational Research; Ethnic Groups; *Family Life; *Family Life Education; Family Relationship; Higher Education; *Minority Groups; Semantic Differential; Social Science Research
IDENTIFIERS Semantic Differential Test for Language Attitudes

ABSTRACT

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Use of the Semantic Differential in Teaching About Minority Group Families

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SP 016 659

Use of the Semantic Differential

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Abstract

A college class on the family relationship patterns of some American minority groups was structured to foster attitude change as well as acquisition of information. As a teaching tool, a semantic differential was developed and administered before and after the course. In this particular class, many students found their views of black and Chicano family life had shifted. Students' views of certain aspects of family life of other cultures also became more positive. Interpersonal contact with speakers and students from other cultural groups is suggested to prompt revision of sterotypic views of the family style of various cultural groups.

Key concepts: family life education, minority families, prejudice, cultural diversity, semantic differential

Though the study of ethnocentrism has focused on prejudice against individuals, a destructive ethnocentrism also marks American attitudes toward the family life of minority cultures. Pejorative traits are frequently attributed to family style, just as they are to individual members of ethnic or racial groups. "Blame-the-victim theory" (Ryan, 1972) lends itself to family characteristics as well as to individual characteristics, as the family itself becomes the target of stereotyping and prejudice. Family life educators, in addition to giving information about family structure and roles in minority groups, also need to be aware of the nature of prejudice and the process by which prejudice and ignorance are overcome together.

Sociological literature offers many examples of prejudice against family style. Heller (1966), for example, in her study of Mexican-American youth, showed a negative view of parenting practices in Mexican-American families in calling parents their children's "own worst enemies." She claimed "the kind of socialization that Mexican-American children generally receive at home is not conducive to the development of capacities needed for advancement in a dynamic industrialized society" (p. 34). She blamed the family for difficulties that Chicano children have in achieving upward mobility within the dominant culture.

Similarly, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, in the Congressional report, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" (1965), stated "the deterioration of the Negro family is the heart of the deterioration of

the fabric of Negro society," and the "fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community" (p. 5). Claiming that the "matriarchal structure into which the Negro community has been forced retards the progress of the group as a whole", Moynihan thought that the "weakness of the family structure" (of black families) was at the center of the "tangle of pathology" of black life.

These examples of sociological impressions of minority group families indicate two lines of thinking. One is that family styles which are different from one's own are ineffectual, destructive, and even pathological. The second is that since some minority groups have trouble assimilating into, or adjusting to, mainstream American life, it must be the result of negative family life experiences.

It is quite likely that many, if not most, of the college students in our classes hold such attitudes, whether or not students are aware of them and express them. Our cultural assumptions and values are frequently outside our awareness (McGoldrick, Pearce, and Giordano, 1982). To find a way of teaching that addresses prejudice as well as lack of knowledge, we can turn to the insights of social psychology.

Prejudice has been a major focus of interest in social psychology for half a century (Metz, 1980). According to Allport (1954), the two essential ingredients of prejudice are 1) that rejection is mixed with hostility and 2) that rejection is founded on a categorical rather than an individual basis, due to a prior and unsupported judgment, or stereotype. Categorical hostility toward members of other ethnic or

racial groups is termed ethnocentrism (Kalin, 1980) or sociocentrism (Metz, 1980). Metz defines sociocentrism as "centering on the positions, perspective, or actions of one's social group" (p. 1). From this perspective, real differences in other social groups are perceived and interpreted pejoratively, and are over-generalized to apply to all members of the other group. Metz suggests, based on the model of Piaget, that this may be a normal and inevitable stage in cognitive development. The reduction of ethnocentrism, which she calls "desociocentering", could presumably occur given favorable circumstances, i.e., exposure to other groups and some degree of dissatisfaction with the adequacy of one's previous intellectual position.

Social psychologists are in agreement that a key factor in reducing ethnocentric attitudes is the amount of inter-group contact (Katz & Braley, 1932; Triandis & Vassilious, 1967; Amir, 1976; Kalin, 1980). Allport (1954) reported that not all types of inter-group contact were useful in reducing ethnocentrism; casual contact or contact based on superordinate-subordinate relationships may increase prejudice, since, in the absence of effective communication, we perceive only those signs that confirm our prejudice (p. 264). However, true acquaintance with members of other groups whom we meet as our equals consistently appears to lessen prejudice. In such situations, we learn that although people from other cultures may be different from us, those differences have both positive and negative aspects, just as our own family style benefits us in some ways and hampers us in other ways. We also learn that there is a wide range of variation within any given culture, so that not all the families

of a given cultural group are the same.

According to Allport (1954), prejudice comprises both beliefs and attitudes, and simply giving information (focusing on beliefs) has not been shown to have immediate effects in reducing prejudice. Focusing on attitudes is also necessary, and personal experience is necessary to change attitudes.

Teaching Methods

The findings reviewed above were taken into account in developing a course in minority family relationships for Extension students at a large state university. Because change in attitudes, as well as dissemination of information, was a teaching objective, two different ways of incorporating inter-group contact into a classroom setting were used. First, at least one guest speaker was scheduled for each minority culture studied. These lecturers were themselves members of the minority group in question, and were either academics in family sociology or professionals in the community serving as counselors, teachers, or advocates for minority group families. Speakers presented material based on both personal and professional experience, and then responded to the students' questions and concerns.

Most of the students taking the course were employed full-time in human service work, such as counseling, youth work, or day care administration. Many already had professional contact with families of

some of the groups studied. In their work, the Extension students were generally in a position of authority in regard to the minority families they met, filling the roles of teacher, counselor, or caseworker. In their contact with the guest speakers, they had an opportunity to discuss family life with minority group members who were their peers in terms of social or professional status.

A second means of incorporating inter-cultural group contact into the class was the regular use of discussion groups. Small groups formed by the instructor on the first day of class comprised students of varied racial and ethnic backgrounds. These groups met for a part of each class session to share reactions to course content, as well as to discuss more personal topics such as the application of family systems concepts to one's own family.

In addition to these two means of face-to-face inter-group contact, there was also indirect contact with each cultural group through reading assignments. Readings were nearly always selected from the writings of "insiders" (members of the cultural group under study) rather than from those of "outsiders" (members of the dominant culture).

Looking at Students' Attitudes

To give students tangible evidence of their own attitude changes during the course, as well as to help the instructor to assess the effects of the course on the viewpoints of the students, a semantic differential was

used (see Appendix). The semantic differential is considered the best available technique for measuring stereotyping and prejudice (Triandis & Davis, 1965; Gardner, Kirby, & Arboleda, 1973). Though mainly used for research, this method was used here as an evaluation tool to give both students and instructor a systematic description of the attitudes of participants before and after their coursework. The word polarities were chosen from family sociology literature on minority group families, and were selected to cover structural and affectional aspects of family life. The differential was reviewed by family professionals from each of the minority groups involved as the word polarities were selected.

Students responded to the set of word polarities one time for each of the cultures studied in the course, and also for white families of the dominant United States culture. Students filled out the differential on the first day of class, marked it with a three-digit number of their choice rather than with their names, and recorded their number in their notebooks, where they could find it several weeks later. In this way the differentials could be turned in to the instructor anonymously, providing a general idea of the class viewpoint toward various groups. On the last day of class, the students again filled out the differential, marking it with their number and turning it in. The differentials could then be matched to give the instructor an interesting supplement to the standard student feedback forms for course evaluation. Forms were then returned to the students so they could see if their own views of minority family styles had shifted during the course.

Since two key ingredients of prejudice are hostility and rejection,

post-test ratings would need to be more favorable and accepting to show a lessening of prejudice and ethnocentrism. Numbers 1 to 7 were assigned to the seven blanks on each continuum or word polarities, with the higher numbers assigned to those words judged more positive. Within the mainstream American culture, it is assumed that the concepts "close-knit, democratic, strong, flexible, supportive, permissive, powerful, nurturing, and warm" are more positively valued than "separate, hierarchical, weak, rigid, indifferent, restrictive, powerless, rejecting, and cold." Thus, high scores went with close-knit, democratic, strong, flexible, supportive, permissive, powerful, nurturing, and warm. "Victimized" received a high score because to consider families of a minority group victimized induces sympathetic and supportive feelings toward them, rather than rejecting and hostile feelings. The students could add up their scores on the differential for each culture to give one score.

In the course described here, students as a group showed the greatest amount of positive change in their assessments of black and Chicano families.

Many students also perceived American Indian families as more warm, Jewish families as more democratic, and Japanese-American families as more victimized in American society, than had been the case before taking the course. This latter change was no doubt due to considerable attention in the reading assignments and from the guest lecturer to the World War II internment of American citizens of Japanese descent and its effects of family roles and structure. Most students had been remarkably

uninformed about this quite recent and remarkable episode in American history.

The least amount change occurred in regard to Hmong families. (The Hmong are a cultural group from northern Laos; they were studied because of the large concentration of this group in the urban area where the course was offered.) This was an interesting development in light of the fact that there were no Hmong students in the class, and the Hmong guest lecturer failed to arrive on the appointed day. Although the students learned about Hmong families through reading and class discussion, they apparently learned nothing that changed their opinions in addition to their store of information.

Although in the course described here, semantic differentials were collected and reviewed by the instructor, this is not necessarily the most important use of this tool. They may be of even more interest to the students themselves, offering a tangible record of the student's changing views. While the course examinations provided the students with concrete evidence of information learned, the semantic differentials offer similar feedback about values and attitudes, fostering a sense of achievement and growth.

Discussion

A course on minority families was described, including the use of semantic differentials to indicate student attitude change. It was found

that students' views of the family life of other cultural groups became more favorable as they learned more about those groups and interacted with members of those groups. This change in viewpoint suggests that the dynamics of prejudice toward family styles of other cultures are similar to the dynamics of prejudice toward individuals. Negative stereotyping of family structure and roles of other groups may give way to more positive attitudes in the face in interaction about family life with social equals of other cultural groups.

It is the author's belief that the family style of every culture has both advantages and disadvantages. As developing human beings we necessarily pass through a stage in which we center on the position, perspective, and actions of our own social group, and evaluate other groups according to how much they are like us or different from us. Exposure to other groups is needed to help us move beyond this sociocentric view to a stage where we can begin to appreciate the advantages of other cultures, while at the same time we gain a clearer understanding of the limitations of our own.

When minority students take courses in American universities and colleges on marriage and family life, they may feel themselves to be invisible. Almost all the sociological and psychological research studied at the undergraduate and even the graduate level describes white Americans. This state of affairs deprives minority students of a sense of validation as Americans, as well as of the opportunity to learn about themselves, something mainstream students take for granted. Just as important, dominant-culture students are deprived of the learning

opportunity that comes from exposure to other ways of structuring family life.

Knowing little about other cultural groups fosters prejudice, a destructive force in our social fabric. The inclusion of more material about minorities in all marriage and family courses, as well as the adoption of courses devoted to the family life of minorities, would represent an important step towards pluralistic family life education.

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Appendix

Please use the word pairs below to indicate your current impression, in general, of the (name of minority group) family:

close knit	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	separate
hierarchical	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	democratic
strong	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	weak
rigid	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	flexible
indifferent	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	supportive
permissive	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	restrictive
powerless	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	powerful
victimized	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	not victimized
nurturing	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	rejecting
warm	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	cold

How much contact do you have with (name of minority) families?

none	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	a great deal

Do you work in any professional capacity with (name of minority) familes?

___ yes ___ no

If yes, how competent do you feel in your work with them?

incompetent	___	___	___	___	___	___	___	very competent